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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR BRIDGE OWNERS UNVEIL BIG PLANS FOR DETROIT

REF: TORONTO 2248

Classified By: Acting Consul General Michael Schimmel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: On October 20 the Detroit Free Press reported that the Ambassador Bridge owners have proposed giving the City of Detroit \$30 million to extend the lease on the Detroit Windsor Tunnel and buy some land at the foot of the bridge. Ambassador Bridge owners say they plan to construct a 200-acre super inspection plaza for U.S. and Canadian border enforcement officials. This article was published one day after the latest meeting of the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) Study, evaluating possible sites for a new border crossing. Although the Ambassador Bridge owners are publicly stating that there is no need to construct a new crossing between Detroit and Windsor, they appear to be quietly moving behind the scenes toward construction of a second privately-held bridge span. END SUMMARY.

Ambassador Bridge Owners Unveil Big Plans for Detroit

2. (U) The Detroit Free Press reported on October 20, 2005, that the Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC), operator of the Ambassador Bridge, proposes giving the City of Detroit \$30 million to extend the lease on the Detroit Windsor Tunnel and buy about 25 acres of land near the bridge. Officials in the Detroit Mayor's office touted the benefit to the city budget, and Ambassador Bridge owners emphasized the economic development benefits, estimating that up to 3,000 jobs would be created by the project. Some Detroit City Councilors, however, expressed reservations about the proposal.

3. (U) The proposal involves creation of a 200 acre super inspection plaza for both U.S. and Canadian border enforcement officials in Detroit at the foot of the existing bridge (at an estimated cost of \$150 to \$200 million). Under this proposal, which would require the concurrence of the Canadian government to station Canadian officials on U.S. soil, all existing border inspection facilities on both sides of the border at the bridge and tunnel would be closed, all inspections would be consolidated on the new site, and a secured two-lane road would be built from the new super inspection plaza to the entrance to the Detroit Windsor Tunnel. Ambassador Bridge officials claimed the resulting efficiencies would dramatically reduce crossing times, enabling the existing crossings to handle more traffic and pushing the need for another bridge span or tunnel expansion 20 to 25 years into the future.

3. (C) Neal Belitsky, Vice President of Operations for the Detroit and Canada Tunnel Corporation (DCTC), told PolOff the DCTC lease with the City of Detroit to operate the tunnel runs through 2020. He noted that the DCTC joint operating agreement with Windsor runs through 2007. Belitsky said he was not certain whether Detroit could legally sell its operating lease with the DCTC.

Is A New Detroit River Crossing In The Cards?

4. (C) The Detroit Free Press article was published one day after the latest meeting of the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) Study, evaluating possible sites for a new border crossing (NOTE: PolOff attended the meeting and will send a report on its conclusions via septel. END NOTE). U.S. participants in the closed-door meeting noted that constructing a second span parallel to the existing Ambassador Bridge, would probably be acceptable from a U.S. standpoint, if the new crossing were publicly owned. But David Wake, from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, said he expects the Canadian side will shortly rule out this possibility for social and environmental reasons because it would result in an increased volume of truck traffic running on already congested local roads through downtown Windsor. DRIC meeting participants agreed that, if the bridge span twinning proposal is rejected by Canada, the U.S. side will drop it from consideration.

5. (C) An Army Corps of Engineers representative at the DRIC meeting, said the Ambassador Bridge owners have in recent weeks come to the Corps offices in Detroit to discuss how to

obtain the permit required to construct a second bridge span.

She, and the Coast Guard representative at the meeting, noted that the U.S. permitting process is basically technical, rather than policy-oriented, and must be completed within 90 days (for the Coast Guard) and 120 days (for the Corps of Engineers). Wake said the bridge owners have been in similar discussions with Canadian government officials. He observed that the Canadian permitting process is similarly technical, noting that it may also be difficult for the Canadian government to avoid issuing a permit if/when they are asked.

16. (C) Comment: Although the Ambassador Bridge owners are publicly stating that there is no need to construct a new crossing between Detroit and Windsor, they appear to be quietly moving behind the scenes toward construction of a second privately-held bridge span. Today,s article in the Detroit Free Press shows the funds the Ambassador Bridge owners are willing to expend to protect their revenue stream (estimated at \$1 billion per year by the Detroit Free Press) and gain political support for their plans on the Detroit side of the river. Opening a new span on the Ambassador Bridge site could bring some benefits to the Detroit side of the river where a highway construction project will soon provide the needed road infrastructure to smoothly funnel additional cross-border traffic onto I-75. But adding a bridge span in downtown Windsor would present a difficult challenge for officials on the Canadian side of the river.
End Comment.

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